**Omnivores as Strikebreakers**

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*Warning: This isn’t a philosophy paper. It’s sort of an essay, or an opinion piece, or something like that. Whatever it is, I hope it’ll be the basis for some good discussions.*

According to a view that I think is prevalent among philosophers and many others, veganism—or at least, what might be called ‘strict veganism’—is not only not morally required. It’s irrational and perhaps even wrong, because many of its restrictions are pointless.

Being vegan, on this view, is like forswearing lying. We should approach lying with caution and shouldn’t just do it whenever we feel like it, but most agree we also shouldn’t accept any blanket prohibition against lying. Likewise, on the present view, we shouldn’t consume animal products whenever we feel like it—and we certainly shouldn’t eat like a typical American—but we also should feel free to consume animal products in certain limited circumstances.

Let’s give a name to this view. Let’s call it *constrained omnivorism*. A constrained omnivore of the purest sort is a person who both endorses this view and engages in associated practices: they consume animal products in certain limited circumstances without hesitation and without remorse, but they diligently abstain in many or most circumstances.

I’ll first say a bit about what constrained omnivorism is. Then I’ll explain what I think veganism is. And then I’ll explain why I think constrained omnivores should be either vegan or (what I’ll call) *pseudo-vegan*. And I’ll argue that constrained omnivores should, for prudential reasons at least, choose veganism over pseudo-veganism. My argument will depend on an analogy between violating veganism’s rules and crossing a picket line.

**What constrained omnivorism is**

The best way to understand constrained omnivorism’s restrictions and permissions is to understand the line of economic reasoning that motivates it. I think this reasoning will be familiar to this audience, so I’ll present it only in its barest outlines. It goes something like this:

First, certain forms of animal-product consumption are (what we might call) *economically active*. Consumption is economically active when there is serious potential that it will have economic effects, i.e., effects produced by a causal pathway that involves economic mechanisms of supply and demand.

Purchasing a Big Mac from McDonald’s is the clearest possible example of economically active consumption. The idea: When you purchase a Big Mac, this is recorded by McDonald’s as a purchase, which produces an economic signal that—through a long and complicated causal chain—can cause perceived demand for meat to increase. And when perceived demand exceeds certain thresholds, producers respond by increasing production, which harms animals. So, there is serious potential that the purchase of a Big Mac will have economic effects that harm animals, according to constrained omnivorism.

In the usual model, the chance of causing a perceived demand threshold to be exceeded is very small, but the harm done when a threshold is exceeded is very large. Different people have different views about when and why it’s wrong to take a small chance of causing great harm, but it seems highly reasonable to say that it’s recklessly immoral to take such a chance, all else equal, if

(i) the expected harm (the probability of causing some possible harm multiplied by the magnitude of the harm) is big, and

(ii) your reasons to take the chance are not very good.

Constrained omnivores agree that these conditions are met in almost all cases where someone purchases a Big Mac. Almost no one ever has very good reasons to purchase a Big Mac, and the expected harm is big. (A common thought: If you purchase a Big Mac and you’re unlucky enough to trigger a production increase in common real-world scenarios, you might cause thousands or tens of thousands of animals to come into existence and be subjected to very bad lives and very bad deaths.) So, constrained omnivores accept a close-to-universal prohibition against purchasing Big Macs.

Second, certain forms of animal-product consumption are *economically inert*. Consumption is economically inert when there is no serious potential that it will have economic effects.

Here’s an example of economically inert consumption: Your department has just had a lunch meeting. Now everyone’s gone back to their office and you’re left to clean up the mess. There’s a few chicken sandwiches left. You’re about to throw them in the trash—no one wants them. But before doing so, you take a few bites. Nobody sees this. According to constrained omnivores, you do not act wrongly when you privately eat one of the leftover sandwiches (because this would be economically inert consumption).

Third, constrained omnivores accept (or at least *the more thoughtful* constrained omnivores accept) that you can initiate economically active consumption without engaging in it yourself, and they allow that this is wrong.

A case: Your coworker has just gone vegan, but she’s wavering. There’s a leftover chicken sandwich that nobody’s going to eat. So you eat it. And you eat it in front of her. She can see you’re enjoying it. Meanwhile, she munches sadly on a poorly-made tofu sandwich that she’s brought from home. (She’s newly vegan and she doesn’t yet know how to make good vegan stuff.) Her will breaks. That night, she goes to McDonald’s, buys a Big Mac, and never flirts with veganism again.

In this case, constrained omnivores agree, you’ve acted wrongly. You shouldn’t have eaten that chicken sandwich in front of your newly vegan coworker. But you’d have been in the clear, morally, if you’d just eaten the sandwich by yourself, alone in your office, where nobody could see, because then you’d have been sure not only that your consumption was economically inert but also that it wouldn’t cause anybody else to engage in economically active consumption.

The sorts of restrictions and permissions that constrained omnivores usually endorse follow pretty straightforwardly from the economic rationale I’ve just sketched. Constrained omnivorism has a unifying principle:

The unifying principle of constrained omnivorism: Don’t engage in or cause others to engage in economically active consumption of animal products. Any other sort of consumption of animal products is permitted.

Also, although constrained omnivores understand that there are cases (like the case of the wavering vegan above) where you shouldn’t engage in economically inert consumption in front of other people, constrained omnivorism is not usually practiced in total secrecy. When constrained omnivores are having dinner with their non-vegan friends, they’ll willingly eat the leftovers, for example. And when constrained omnivores are asked how they approach ethical issues in consumption, they’ll answer by giving something like the unifying principle above.

**What veganism is**

Sometimes people say that veganism is a philosophy, or a view, or a theory, or a principle, or something like that. But I believe veganism is none of those things. I believe veganism is a social movement.

This social movement exists in order to promote certain aims. The central aim of veganism is to bring about the abolition of animal agriculture, I believe.

And the movement doesn’t just have that aim. It also wants to steer us down a certain path. The path seems to be something like this: First, we increase the percentage of vegans in our society through vegan activism; this causes various social changes (veganism becomes less weird, more mainstream) and also causes various changes in producer behavior (vegan products become more widespread); these changes reduce practical and psychological barriers to veganism, which causes even more people to take the plunge and go vegan; this causes more social changes and more changes in producer behavior; this pattern continues until at some point, the percentage of vegans in our society is large enough that demand for animal products stops increasing and starts decreasing; production falls accordingly; eventually, serious legal restrictions on animal agriculture become politically viable (because both producers and consumers now have less to lose if such restrictions are implemented); these legal restrictions make animal products more expensive and less widely available, causing still further reductions in demand and supply of animal products; finally, it becomes politically possible to simply abolish the practice of animal agriculture completely.

That’s a path that we as a society could take. And it would be great if we did take that path. It is at least a beautiful dream. And I do not see any reason why we can’t make that dream real. It wouldn’t even be bad for most people in our society if we did this. In any case I think the main point of veganism is to try to accomplish something like this. But I don’t claim that abolition of animal agriculture is veganism’s only aim. The movement has other aims, too. For example, it aims to end hunting of wild animals.

Being vegan is being a part of the social movement that has these sorts of aims. However, importantly, you can be a part of the social movement that has these aims even if you don’t share all of those aims yourself. Compare: You can be a part of a religious university dedicated to furthering a religious mission even if you don’t yourself aim to further that mission.

Here’s why I deny that veganism is a view. If veganism were a view, then you could be vegan and order a Big Mac, as long as you signed on for the view (whatever that view might be). But the moment you order a Big Mac is the moment you cease being vegan. Even if you believe that ordering the Big Mac is deeply wrong but you order the Big Mac anyway out of weakness of will, you’re still giving up your claim to be vegan when you order it. So, veganism isn’t a view.

One might agree that veganism is morethan a view but propose that veganism is some kind of combination of a view with a practice. According to this way of thinking, to be vegan is to hold some view *and* to act in accordance with that view. But this proposal, I believe, is mistaken. I believe there simply isn’t any view that one needs to accept in order to be vegan. For example, there are vegans who believe that animal agriculture should be reformed rather than abolished, or who have no firm opinions about whether animal agriculture should be reformed or abolished. Such people are or can be vegans, I believe, even though they do not endorse a view that—I claim—is at the heart of veganism.

One might propose that being vegan is *merely* a practice, but I think this proposal is clearly wrong. What would the practice be? Perhaps it would be a certain diet. But if someone has a lot of food allergies and for that reason alone excludes all animal products from their diet, they still aren’t vegan. Of course, veganism isn’t only about what we eat. But I think that even if the person with food allergies happened to follow a set of practices that are in line with all of veganism’s restrictions, they still wouldn’t count as vegan.

Why isn’t the person with the food allergies a vegan, even if they follow a practice that is identical to the practices of true vegans? Because—I propose—being a vegan just is being a member of the social movement that constitutes veganism. The person with the food allergies isn’t a member of that movement, so isn’t vegan.

If veganism is a social movement, as I claim, then we should ask: how does one get to be a member of that movement? To begin with, you have to adhere to veganism’s restrictions. You can’t eat meat, for example, even if it’s going to be discarded and nobody will see. Adherence to such restrictions is an entry condition that the movement has accepted and imposed. But adhering to those restrictions isn’t by itself sufficient for being vegan.

One way to be vegan, I think, is to do these things: (i) to *sign up*, i.e., to make a conscious and deliberate decision to become vegan; (ii) to adhere to the various restrictions of veganism; and (iii) to resolve to adhere to those restrictions indefinitely. I think if you do those things, you’re vegan.

But I think it is also possible to find your way into the movement without signing up. For example, I think there can be vegan babies and vegan dogs, even though babies and dogs can’t sign up. A baby or a dog can be part of a movement without signing up in much the same way that a child (and perhaps even a dog) can be part of a religion despite being incapable of consciously embracing that religion. This is what you might call *derivative membership*—membership that you acquire through your relationship to another member. In any case, I suspect (i), (ii), and (iii) are necessary and sufficient for non-derivative membership.

**Veganism lacks a unifying principle**

Consider the Vegan Society’s definition of veganism:

Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals.

One might think that this definition could serve as a unifying principle of veganism. If that were so, then we could perhaps use this definition to tell us what veganism permits and forbids.

I think there are two ways that some principle P could be meaningfully described as the (or a) unifying principle of veganism:

(1) *The deductive role*:If all (or perhaps just most) of the restrictions and permissions of veganism could be deduced from P, then P would be the (or a) unifying principle of veganism.

(2) *The ornamental role*:If it were the case that P is very frequently invoked by vegans to explain veganism’s restrictions and permissions, then P would be the (or a) unifying principle of veganism.

A principle can have the ornamental role without having the deductive role. Consider “All men are created equal,” from which nothing in particular follows. That slogan is a unifying principle in American political and legal life not because it has any implications, but because it stands in for more precise claims that do have implications and because it appears in many commonly given explanations of core American commitments (e.g., the illegality of slavery).

As it happens, though, the Vegan Society’s definition doesn’t play either the deductive role or the ornamental role.

It can’t play the deductive role because, first, the Vegan Society’s definition is even less meaningful than “All men are created equal.” Nobody has ever given a satisfactory explanation of the meaning of ‘practicable’ (as it appears in the Vegan Society’s definition). If you ask any vegan to explain what ‘practicable’ means and how it differs from ‘possible,’ the answer will usually be gobbledygook. It is also unclear what it means to ‘exclude’ a form of exploitation or cruelty.

It may be possible to clarify these key terms in satisfactory ways and thus to make a meaningful principle out of the Vegan Society’s definition. But even if we were to do this, I don’t think we would be able to say that veganism’s restrictions and permissions could be deduced from what the Vegan Society has offered us.

Consider Oreos, which contain palm oil. It’s widely believed that palm oil production involves cruelty to animals. And on every reasonable interpretation of ‘possible and practicable,’ it’s possible and practicable to avoid consumption of Oreos. Yet Oreos are almost universally recognized as vegan. So, contrary to the Vegan Society’s definition, veganism does not require us to “exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food.” (This is on the assumption that *excluding* a given form of cruelty means *at least* avoiding products produced by processes that involve that form of cruelty.)

The Vegan Society’s definition also doesn’t play an ornamental role. The definition simply doesn’t get mentioned often enough for that. If you ask a vegan why milk is forbidden, for example, they’ll explain harms of dairy farming but they won’t typically bother to couch these explanations in the Vegan Society’s ungainly talk of possibility and practicability. “All men are created equal” and other such slogans animate American politics and law; but the Vegan Society’s definition simply does not have anything like the same kind of role.

For the reasons I’ve given, I don’t think that the Vegan Society’s definition can be regarded as a unifying principle of veganism. And I don’t think there’s any other principle that can be so regarded, either. There is no vegan analog of constrained omnivorism’s unifying principle.

And there’s a straightforward reason for this, I think. Veganism is a social movement with various aims (the overarching aim being abolition of animal agriculture, or so I’ve claimed), and as a social movement its restrictions and permissions are determined through a collective process. There’s no *formal* process—for example there is no legislative body that comes together to decide what is and isn’t vegan. But there is still a *collective* process by which the vegan community sets its rules.

I think veganism’s rules are comparable in some ways to the laws of a town. There is no general principle that unifies and explains why the laws of any given town are what they are. For example, there is no principle from which you can deduce the speed limit of a town’s main road. You can know the speed limit only by observation (e.g., by looking at the posted signs). Different laws in a town are made at different times, by different legislators, for different sorts of reasons. You can explain why any given law is what it is, but the laws taken together form a bit of a hodgepodge. I think the rules of veganism are a similar kind of hodgepodge. And I think this explains why the rules of veganism can’t be unified under any general principle.

**The vegan community**

On the view I’m sketching here, the rules of veganism are set by the vegan community. What is the vegan community? I think it is composed not only of vegans but also of others who have a voice in it despite not being vegan themselves. Shannon Martinez, who runs well-known vegan restaurants in Melbourne, is not vegan (which is deeply annoying to many vegans). But I think it’s correct to think of her as a member of the vegan community. She often speaks publicly about veganism, and vegans pay attention to what she says, and in this way she participates in the collective process that determines our understanding of veganism despite not being vegan herself.

How does the vegan community give rules to itself? Well, it talks to itself a lot. And veganism’s restrictions and permissions emerge from all of that talking. Because of this, I think the best way (and perhaps the only way) to directly know what veganism permits and forbids is to listen to what is said in the vegan community.

If you listen to the vegan community, for example, you will hear that honey is forbidden. Reasons for a restriction against honey are frequently given. Principles may be invoked. Whether or not those reasons are any good, and whether or not those principles are endorsed and applied in any consistent way, the restriction exists. Honey isn’t vegan—just because the vegan community has collectively decided that it isn’t.

I don’t have a detailed view to offer about the nature of the process by which the vegan community settles on its restrictions and permissions. But I feel sure that it is not a majoritarian process. This is because it seems clear that some individuals and organizations in the vegan community have a greater role than others in interpreting and creating veganism. People who have loud voices in the community—such as prominent vegan activists and celebrities—may be able to bypass the majority, on some occasions, and shape veganism’s rules directly from their podiums. If Earthling Ed were to take the public stance that honey is vegan or that palm oil is not vegan, this could go some considerable distance toward making it so.

At the same time, veganism clearly isn’t a bureaucratic dictatorship. I think that the process by which veganism’s permissions and restrictions are formed is democratic in some loose sense. It’s a function of the attitudes of the vegan community, taken as a whole.

**Veganism has reasons for its rules**

It’s the community’s say-so that makes a rule a *vegan* rule. But the community has reasons for its rules; the community is not irrational. These reasons influence the content of the rules, though not in a principled way.

Here are some of the sorts of considerations that I believe move the community to accept or not to accept a rule:

Economic activity: If consumption of a given product would typically cause (via economic channels) animal suffering, this is regarded as a reason to forbid consumption of that product.

It’s in virtue of this sort of consideration that purchasing meat, dairy, and eggs is forbidden in veganism. This is a type of reason that both vegans and constrained omnivores recognize.

Demandingness: If a restriction against consumption of a given product would be very inconvenient or difficult to follow for many people, this is regarded as a reason to permit consumption of that product.

I suspect that demandingness considerations partly explain why the community has never accepted a rule against palm oil. Palm oil is in many otherwise vegan products. If we had a rule against palm oil, then being vegan would be extraordinarily difficult for many of us, I think. Many vegans wantto forbid palm oil, but they have been unsuccessful in making it the case that the movement forbids it.

Transmissibility: If one restriction is more transmissible than another, this is treated as a reason for the first restriction over the second.

A rule is more transmissible when it is more likely to spread from one person to another. I transmit a rule to you when you see that I abide by the rule and this inspires you to adopt that rule for yourself.

I’m not sure whether transmissibility is very often consciouslyconsidered by individual vegans as a reason for (or against) any given rule. It may be that transmissibility is just an evolutionary factor: more transmissible rules proliferate more successfully within the community, which creates the illusion that individuals are consciously selecting rules for their transmissibility. Even if that is so, however, I think it might still make sense to say that the *community* treats transmissibility as a reason for a rule—even if no *individual* in the community does so. In any case, I believe that the community does somehow select more transmissible rules over less transmissible ones.

What determines a rule’s transmissibility? Demandingness is a major factor: people are more likely to adopt a rule if it’s easier to do so. (Thus a rule against palm oil would have very low transmissibility.) But there’s other factors, too.

A major factor affecting transmissibility is what you might call *intuitive sensibleness*. A rule is intuitively sensible when, at first glance, the rule seems reasonable; it’s not intuitively sensible when it seems arbitrary at first glance, or when it seems inconsistent with other restrictions or permissions already in place. When a rule has low intuitive sensibleness, it’s likely to be dismissed as irrational (even if it isn’t in fact irrational) and hence unlikely to transmit.

Here there is a trade-off: sometimes a rule can be made much more intuitively sensible by being made slightly more demanding, resulting in a net improvement in transmissibility.

For example, a rule that simply and completely forbids consumption of meat may be more intuitively sensible than a more complicated rule that forbids most consumption of meat but permits secret consumption of leftover meat. The exception carved out in that latter rule appears arbitrary, I think, unless you understand the sort of economic reasoning that underlies constrained omnivorism. And so, a simple rule against any consumption of meat is more intuitively sensible from the perspective of those who do not understand that sort of economic reasoning (i.e., most people). Given this, and given that a blanket rule against consumption of meat is only slightly more demanding than a rule that forbids consumption of meat except in economically inactive circumstances, the former rule seems likely to be more transmissible. And the former rule is—I think not coincidentally—a rule that veganism has embraced.

I’ll just mention one more type of reason that I think influences veganism (but I think there’s many other reasons that could be mentioned):

User error: If one rule is (when adopted by regular people) more likely to be misapplied in bad ways than another rule, this is treated as a reason for the first rule.

Veganism forbids consumption of animals. An alternative restriction would forbid consumption of animals *except for bivalves*. The second rule is attractive to many constrained omnivores. (Bivalves apparently lack consciousness and so cannot suffer.) The problem, however, is that people who accept the second rule might be more likely to misapply it than people who accept the first rule. If we spread around the idea that it’s okay to eat bivalves, there will be some people who confusedly purchase fish under the mistaken belief that fish are bivalves. And some will form the mistaken belief that fish are similar to bivalves, so if it’s okay to eat bivalves then it’s okay to eat fish too. Because of this, if your rules are designed not only to guide you but also to be transmitted to other people to guide them as well, you should (all else equal) favor the first rule over the second.

I think this sort of consideration about user error is part of why eating bivalves has never been seen as acceptable from a vegan perspective. More broadly, I think it helps to explain why veganism’s rules are typically blunt and simple. For example, as vegans we just don’t consume milk. Ever. Period. And we don’t eat chicken—even if it’s leftover and nobody’s looking. And so on. Such simple rules are hard to misapply; rules that carve out many exceptions are prone to create confusion and to be misapplied.

If we were to list all of veganism’s rules, I feel sure we’d find many pairs of rules such that (i) there are reasons to be given for each rule in the pair, yet (ii) no principled explanation can be given why those rules togetherare part of veganism’s requirements. Veganism has reasons for its rules; despite this, veganism’s rules are sort of all over the place.

**Crossing a picket line**

Before I discuss the “Why be vegan?” question, I want to talk about a different question: Why shouldn’t you cross a picket line?

Imagine this. You work in a factory in a small town somewhere. (Maybe it’s the same town discussed above.) There’s a union and the union has called for a strike. Suppose you happen to know that the union made the wrong call. They should have continued negotiating with the factory owners. The strike was hasty. In this situation, should you strike or should you turn up for work?

In cases like this, most of the time, you should strike. If you turn up for work, you’ll undermine the union—because the union gets its negotiating power from its ability to credibly threaten to strike; and its ability to credibly threaten to strike is undermined if its members do not strike when called to do so. Undermining the union is bad: things will be better for you and for your fellow workers in the long run if the union is more powerful than if it is less powerful. Given this, the fact that, in this specific instance, the strike shouldn’t have been called in the first place is of little relevance. Now that the strike has been called, your crossing the picket line will undermine the union, and that will be bad.

To be sure, there are versions of the case where crossing the picket line would be the right thing to do. For example, suppose the union has a history of making bad calls. You want to undermine their power so that an alternative better-managed union can emerge and replace the current union. Then, maybe, you shouldn’t strike.

But the union’s leadership would usually have to be pretty bad, and the problems within the union pretty unfixable, to justify efforts to undermine and replace the union. A union is the product of a lot of work. Destroying one union and replacing it with another is costly and time-consuming. And it’s risky: whatever new organization takes the current union’s place could be as bad or worse; and there’s no guarantee that efforts to rebuild a new union on the ashes on the old one would be successful. Given this, if the union isn’t irretrievably corrupt or otherwise mismanaged, the safest course will usually be to try to support the union by complying with it, even when it makes bad calls, while also working internally to improve its decisions in the future.

**Veganism is sort of a union**

In the case of the union that I’ve just discussed, the union has a kind of moral authority over you: it can make it the case that you ought to strike. If there were no union or if the union hadn’t called for a strike, then you’d be under no moral obligation to refrain from showing up to work. In fact, you might be under a moral obligation to show up for work. But once the union has called for a strike, showing up for work switches from permissible to wrong (under normal circumstances).

Veganism’s rules are like a strike. Just as a union demands that you not work on certain occasions, veganism demands that you refrain from certain ways of purchasing and eating, certain ways of clothing yourself, and so on. I want to argue that veganism has moral authority over us in much the same way that a union has moral authority over workers.

The first point I want to make is that veganism has some power to influence producers’ behavior, but its power depends on the number of faithful vegans—much as a union’s power depends on the number of faithful members.

In present circumstances, vegans are a small minority of the population, but we are still exerting significant influence on producers. We have this influence despite our small size because it is very often easy for producers to comply with veganism’s demands: many products can be made vegan by replacing a few non-vegan ingredients. For example, 7-Eleven has switched to vegan mayonnaise in all of its prepared foods in US stores. It’s done this because non-vegans won’t notice and because the switch allows them to market their prepared foods to vegans as well. If the proportion of vegans in the population grows, the power of the movement to influence the behavior of producers in these sorts of ways will also grow.

Given that the power of the movement depends on the number of its members, we have a moral reason to be members of the movement—*if* we believe that the growth of the movement would be a morally good thing.

The reasoning here is similar to the reasoning about thresholds (discussed above) that motivates constrained omnivorism. Both the constrained omnivore and the vegan agree that when you purchase a Big Mac you take a small chance of causing perceived demand for meat to exceed a threshold, triggering a production increase, and that this is bad for animals. Similarly, when you’re vegan and act accordingly when making purchasing decisions, you take many small chances—every time you make a purchase—of causing the perceived quantity of vegans to exceed some threshold at which producers react.

And here it’s very important to emphasize that veganism’s power to affect production depends not only on the number of vegans but also on the existence of consensus among vegans about the rules—just as the power of a union depends not only on the number of members but also on the number of *faithful* members who share a similar understanding of what being in the union involves and requires.

There’s a simple reason why veganism’s success as a social movement requires consensus. In order to rationally invest in the vegan market, producers need to know *how* to serve the vegan market. For that purpose, it’s imperative that producers be able to know which ingredients are vegan and which aren’t. And producers could not know this if vegans each had their own personalized rules. In a world where veganism meant something different to everyone, producers developing new products would be unable to know in advance what must be done in order for their products to count as vegan. In fact, in such a world, it would perhaps be impossible to say whether a given product is vegan or not. Accordingly, the power of veganism to influence producer behavior would be diminished.

So, if we have reason to support the vegan movement, then we also have reason not to muddy veganism’s waters by, for example, designing and acting in accordance with our own personal version of veganism. If veganism is a generally good movement, then it’s more important to spread veganism’s rules around, and thus compel producers to bend to them, than to engage in efforts to refine and perfect the rules.

And, by the way, the present point goes for bothpermissions andrestrictions. As vegan consumers, I think we have reason not to purchase products that contain honey—but we also have reason not to avoid purchasing products that contain palm oil.

**Why be vegan?**

It must be admitted that, just as there are certain limited circumstances where it would make sense to try to undermine the power of a union, it could make sense for us as consumers to try to undermine the power of the vegan movement.

Here’s a case. Suppose that the vegan community were to embrace a blanket restriction against the consumption of any product not made by a completely vegan company. This would make veganism’s rules extremely difficult to follow for many people, and this in turn would mean that transmission of those rules would be next to impossible. And if transmission of the rules is very low, then it would be impossible for veganism to promote its aims, including its loftiest aim—the abolition of animal agriculture. In this scenario, it would be reasonable to see veganism’s existence as unfortunate. Veganism would be occupying a space that could be occupied by a far more effective movement instead. And then it would make sense to try to undermine veganism in the hope of squelching it and replacing it with something better.

My point at the moment isn’t that we aren’t in a case like that. My point is that that’sthe sort of case in which it would be reasonable not to be vegan. When you decide to purchase a product containing honey, for example, you’re not just flouting a rule that you believe to be (and perhaps even actually is) a senseless rule. You’re also undermining the power of the vegan movement. That’s a reasonable thing to try to do if you think the vegan movement ought to be phased out and replaced with something else. But it’s not a reasonable thing to do, all else equal, if you think that veganism is broadly good and ought to take hold.

And an important point here is that replacing a social movement, like replacing a union, is costly, time-consuming, and risky. If veganism were to go away, there’s no guarantee that anything similar would take its place, and there’s no guarantee that the replacement movement would be better. Given this, I think that the vegan movement would need to be quite bad in some way in order to justify efforts to destroy and replace it. The mere fact that we see ways that veganism’s rules could be improved isn’t sufficient to justify such efforts.

**Veganism, constrained omnivorism, and pseudo-veganism**

Constrained omnivores are narrowly focused on the economic activity of particular acts of consumption. They are insufficiently attentive to the ways in which our choices as consumers can support or undermine veganism as a social movement. We have reasons to be vegan that constrained omnivores fail to notice.

But these reasons really only apply to cases where we are engaging in acts of consumption that others can detect. Compare three cases:

(i) You purchase a Big Mac from McDonald’s.

(ii) You purchase a box of breakfast cereal that contains honey rather than a similar alternative that contains sugar.

(iii) You take a secret bite out of a leftover chicken sandwich.

Constrained omnivores and vegans will agree about the first case. You shouldn’t buy that Big Mac. Buying the Big Mac risks causing harm to animals through familiar economic mechanisms of supply-and-demand, and this—all agree—is sufficient to establish that purchasing the Big Mac is wrong.

On the second case, constrained omnivores and vegans will part ways, assuming that honey production is not harmful to bees or is not unjustly harmful to them and does not involve any other harms to animals. On that assumption, there’s no narrowly economic basis for opposing the purchase of a honey-containing product. So, the constrained omnivore will say that this purchase is acceptable. By contrast, the vegan will maintain that the honey-containing product is unacceptable, even if honey production is harmless. Purchasing the honey-containing product is wrong because it undermines the power of veganism as a social movement.

Suppose you agree with the vegan perspective on (ii). And suppose you agree with my main point in this essay: that constrained omnivorism correctly sees that we have responsibilities as economic agents, but fails to recognize our responsibilities as inhabitants of a world in which veganism as a social movement exists. Suppose that you therefore reject constrained omnivorism. This doesn’t yet take us all the way to veganism, because abandoning constrained omnivorism isn’t the same thing as embracing veganism.

Consider an approach that we might call *pseudo-veganism*. The pseudo-vegan understands that it’s important to spread veganism far and wide. But she also sees that she can do this without being vegan herself—as long as she keeps her non-vegan choices secret. So, for example, she avoids purchasing honey-containing ingredients (because such purchases are detectable to producers and thus capable of undermining the power of the vegan movement). And she tells all of her friends and family members that she is a completely faithful vegan (because she knows that being a public non-vegan damages veganism’s growth). But she’s not in fact vegan: she takes secret bites out of chicken sandwiches whenever she gets the chance (because she knows that these undetected choices have no effect on the success or failure of veganism as a social movement).

I grant that I’ve said nothing in this essay that counts against pseudo-veganism. At best, my arguments here only support the view that you should be either a vegan or a pseudo-vegan rather than a constrained omnivore.

I think pseudo-veganism is at least imprudent. It would be annoying to live such a strange lie. And that lie could never be far from your mind because our social lives largely revolve around talking about food. The pseudo-vegan would be unable to have a forthcoming conversation about her food-related likes and dislikes; she would need to always remember that there are certain things about her food choices that she has to conceal. Additionally, there’s virtually no upside of being pseudo-vegan. Taking secret bites out of leftover chicken sandwiches is no one’s idea of a great time. For these sorts of reasons I think it is clearly better, from a purely self-interested point of view, to be a vegan rather than a pseudo-vegan. But I admit that I haven’t made a moral case against pseudo-veganism in this essay.